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Early Developments of Ecofeminist Thought in French Women's Early Romantic Fiction

Ecocritical analysis of American and British literature is extensive. French literary criticism has, until recently (Boudreau and Sullivan, 2016; Finch-Race and Posthumus, 2017), been lacking in this direction. Nevertheless, there remains extremely minimal ecocritical analysis of eighteenth-century French literature.¹ Moreover, ecocritical approaches to understanding early Romantic French women's fiction have, thus far, been overlooked;² indeed, the notion that landscape might play any role in their work has been dismissed (Finch, 2000, p.22; Sainte-Beuve, 1844, p.47; Sykes, 1949, pp.128-129). Such an examination, however, would shed light both on the development of ecological thinking and on the authors' reactions to the socio-historical period in which they were writing.

Whilst Germaine de Staël's *Corinne* (1807) is well known, Sophie Cottin's *Malvina* (1800/1801), *Amélie Mansfield* (1802/1803), and Adélaïde de Souza's *Adèle de Sénange* (1794) are less so. Conducting comparative analyses of these novels, this paper examines the links between women's history and the history of the environment therein. Staël, Cottin and Souza were writing at a time when ecofeminist terminology did not yet exist. Nonetheless, the key observations with which ecofeminism now concerns itself certainly did. We should note here that, although there are several ecofeminist positions, there are aspects all ecofeminists agree on: "to make visible [...] 'woman-nature connections'" (Warren, 1993, p.253), and to highlight "an important link between the domination of women and the domination of nature" (Davion, 1994, p.8). Eighteenth-century Europe witnessed a desire for that dual domination. Throughout the Enlightenment and as the Industrial Revolution expanded, nature was regarded as an immature state of being, improved upon by human knowledge. As Buffon (1780, I:4) stated: "la Nature est autant notre ouvrage que le sien; nous avons su la tempérer, la modifier, la plier à nos besoins, à nos désirs; nous avons fondé, cultivé, fécondé la Terre". In the medical texts of Cabanis, Roussel and Stahl, "we find the often noticed association of woman and nature justified by notions of biological maternity and of the female bodily processes" (Bloch and Bloch, 1980, p.33). For Rousseau, who famously defined women and their societal role, "women's closeness to Nature [...] provided a rationale for the exclusion from citizenship" (Lloyd, 1984, p.77) and condemnation as inferior (Capitan, 1993, p.111).

If ecocritical approaches to French literature are rare, ecofeminist approaches are even more so. Yet, this is a significant oversight. Staël's, Cottin's and Souza's novels highlight the restrictive control over women in their contemporary society (Goldberg Moses, 1985, p.14; Call, 2002, p.87; Coward, 1997, p.75; Carpenter, 2007, p.12). One means by which they do so is to

remind the reader of pre-established woman-nature connections, and then reveal the oppression of woman through that of nature. An ecofeminist reading of their work is therefore highly appropriate. However, their arguments cover several subfields of ecofeminism. As their novels progress, more than one factor in women's oppression is revealed. Consequently, these writers prompt us to rethink our understanding of the development of ecofeminist thought. Liberal, cultural and radical ecofeminists highlight the lack of opportunities for women to realise their potential, a female/nature—male/culture dichotomy, and the argument that women and nature are oppressed by men. Staël, Cottin and Souza show that these notions are not necessarily as straightforward as they seem, and that we must also consider what might be termed an early form of social ecofeminism.

Staël and Cottin first establish a representation within the environment of their eponymous heroines' person and/or emotion. In doing so, they remind us of the women-nature connection described by contemporary scientists and philosophers, and of the ecofeminist argument that "[n]ature and women are [...] readily connected discursively and materially" (Munroe and Laroche, 2011, p.2).

Corinne, a half-British, half-Italian female genius who challenges social norms by choosing to write and act, finds her alternate emotional states of suffering and happiness reflected in the surrounding landscapes. In Italy, she is honoured for entering the public sphere of writing and acting, and her talents flourish amid and because of the landscape and climate (*Corinne*, pp.49, 367, 369). However, during her adolescence, spent in England with her stepmother Lady Edgermond, British society is cold and condemning. The natural landscape is also cold, bleak, depressing (Ibid., p.367), and almost permanently dark (Ibid., p.378). Compounding matters, the more depressed Corinne becomes because of this landscape, the more her talent dissipates (Ibid., p.371). Where nature is cold and barren, so is her talent; where nature flourishes, so does she. Similar mutual sensitivity appears in Cottin's *Malvina* and *Amélie Mansfield*. In the former, the heroine and her husband Edmond retire to a countryside haven permeated with imagery reflecting their emotional happiness:

[O]n eût dit que la nature entière cherchait à s'embellir pour eux. [...] [U]ne source d'eau pure [...] coulait en filets d'argent sur un tapis d'émeraude; l'astre du jour, en inondant l'occident d'une mer de feu, colorait un ciel d'azur, de nuages d'or et de pourpre; et les premières ombres de la nuit, descendant lentement sur l'univers, luttèrent en vain contre les derniers rayons du soleil. (*Malvina*, IV:41-2)

An anthropomorphized nature willingly extends its life because of the happiness within it. The purity and majesty of the scene also create a sentimental aesthetic response in the couple, increasing their contentment. Thus, nature simultaneously thrives on and heightens their happiness. Whilst nature appears linked to the couple equally, *Malvina* remarks that it was she

who nurtured the garden and who received sustenance in return (*M*, IV:198). In *Amélie Mansfield*, the heroine's family plant a tree upon her birth in an area of the estate which thence becomes known as *le bosquet d'Amélie*. As Amélie grows, she cultivates this site, planting flowers around the tree (*Amélie Mansfield*, I:103-104). The flourishing of the grove is both a mirror of Amélie's own maturation and a consequence of her care.

Nature in these novels clearly echoes notions associated with an emerging Romanticism: living at one with verdant nature, representing nature as a space for self-discovery and experiencing emotion. However, whilst the literary and cultural context surrounding Staël and Cottin undeniably informs their writing, their interest in nature allows them to extend these early Romantic themes towards a discussion of women's oppression.

Corinne, *Malvina* and *Amélie Mansfield* all appear to uphold the "[c]ultural ecofeminist philosophy [which] embraces intuition, an ethic of caring, and web-like human-nature relationships" (Merchant, 2005, p.202). There is mutual cultivation on the part of Staël's and Cottin's heroines and their natural environment: women imbue the earth with life-giving essentials, and then draw strength and creativity from it. Similarly, we see evidence of liberal ecofeminism here, which asserts that "[g]iven equal opportunities [...], women, like men, can contribute to the improvement of the environment" (Ibid., pp.200-201). When Corinne is afforded equal opportunity to engage in the public sphere, she and her surrounding landscape thrive. When Amélie is given the opportunity to protect the environment, it flourishes. Ecofeminist leanings do not end here; for mankind's assumed superiority over nature ultimately destroy Amélie's grove, Malvina's garden and Corinne's Roman landscape, and the devastation of these areas leads to the destruction of the women connected with them.

Corinne refuses to conform to a domestic role, and finds herself forbidden both her talent and her lover. Unable to live without either, she dies, devalued by British society, a victim of its restrictive demands. As the weight of society's restrictions and her consequent future unhappiness become more apparent, we notice Corinne's Italian landscape dying around her. It is worth noting here that Staël's other works present Britain in a more favourable light, associating the north in general (*De l'Allemagne*) and the British landscape in particular (*De La Littérature*) with Romanticism and literary creativity. The ecofeminist aspect to *Corinne* is therefore particularly powerful to override the usual Staëlien argument here. Staël emphasises the *mauvais air* which infects Rome's natural surroundings and the ecological devastation which contributed to it:

sans doute l'absence d'arbres dans la campagne autour de la ville en est une des causes, et c'est peut-être pour cela que les anciens Romains avaient consacré les bois aux déesses, afin de les faire respecter par le peuple. Maintenant des forêts sans nombre ont été abattues; pourrait-il en effet exister de nos jours des lieux assez sanctifiés pour que l'avidité s'abstînt

de les dévaster? Le mauvais air est le fléau des habitants de Rome, et menace la ville. (C, pp.142-3)

Even when describing an unexploited landscape in this region, Staël uses the opportunity to comment negatively on mankind's attitude: "Ces plaines incultes doivent déplaire aux agriculteurs, aux administrateurs, à tous ceux qui spéculent sur la terre, et veulent l'exploiter pour les besoins de l'homme" (Ibid., p.130). Nature is heavily manipulated, then, and mankind's inability to see its life-supporting importance leads to the city being threatened by the noxious result. Similarly, society's inability to see the generative importance of verdant nature to Corinne's talent and health leads to the latter's death. The radical ecofeminist argument that "[c]onquest is implicit in the relationship, with nature and woman on one side, man and culture on the other" (Devine, 1992, p.10) is evident here.

Malvina's madness and death are brought on both by her husband's affair and by losing her adopted daughter at the biological father's insistence. As withered and dead branches fall, the heroine's demise is prefigured in that of the garden which once echoed her happiness:

[I]ci, tout était beau, ajouta-t-elle en étendant la main vers tout le jardin; là, je cueillais des roses, elles étaient pour lui; ici, j'entendais les oiseaux, ils chantaient pour lui; partout je respirais un air doux, c'était encore pour lui; tout, tout pour lui... Mais il a fui, et tout s'est desséché, et la fleur est tombée, et la terre qui la portait ne la reconnaît plus. (M, IV:198).

The repetition of 'pour lui' underlines that Malvina's love for Edmond motivated her cultivation of the garden. Once Edmond neglects his wife and her garden, both perish. Here, "tout s'est desséché" symbolises Malvina's loss of motherhood: her child has been snatched away and the barren earth represents her own barrenness. The flower's literal fall symbolises Malvina's personal downfall in her loss of reputation. Finally, "la terre qui la portait ne la reconnaît plus" recalls that the society which once welcomed Malvina now ostracises her. Thus, nature reinforces the notion that both Edmond and external society bring Malvina to the edge of death. One cherished flower announces her death more poignantly still:

Voyez-vous cette fleur qui est sur mon sein? je la lui avais donnée la veille de son départ; mais il la laissa tomber en me quittant; [...] elle est morte, sans doute parce qu'il l'avait rejeté [...] pourtant, il lui a fallu tout un jour pour mourir; à moi, il ne me faudra qu'un moment. (Ibid., IV:199)

The heroine's treatment at the hands of her husband is mirrored in his treatment of the garden, echoing the ecofeminist argument: "the alienation of man from nature puts him in a position of control and dominance. Man [...] has put himself in the hierarchy above all, which gives him the implicit right to exploit those beneath him" (Devine, 1992, p.3).

Aristocratic society's restrictions and domination also bring about Amélie's death. Despite her Grandfather's demands that she marry her cousin Ernest, Amélie marries M. Mansfield, a

poet far beneath her social status. Consequently, she is ostracised, and Mme de Woldemar commands that Amélie's grove be torn down. The servants secretly refuse, however (A, I:104), and, as the grove survives, so does the woman connected to it. Upon discovering the grove's continued existence, Woldemar is infuriated (Ibid., III:179-182), and her vehement insistence leaves no doubt that it will be eradicated: "demain, si je vis encore, il ne restera pas vestige de ce lieu abhorré" (Ibid., III:179). When Amélie's representation in nature dies, so too will she. When, later widowed, she falls in love with Ernest, Woldemar refuses the marriage, and Amélie commits suicide.

These heroines are all to be disposed of as patriarchal society requires, and they die when unable to rebel. In this respect, Cottin and Staël highlight the oppressive treatment of women by the patriarchy in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century France. Prefiguring radical ecofeminism, Staël and Cottin connect exploitation, neglect and destruction of landscapes to the exploitation, neglect and destruction of the women tied to these landscapes, and show how both are the result of the actions of a dominant patriarchal society built on a hierarchy which devalues both women and nature.

However, the imposition of a simple binary established along gender lines and the attributing of blame for industrial exploitation of nature and domination of women to men alone is overly simplistic, as these novels suggest. In fact, it is more accurate to say that Staël and Cottin show environmental destruction and social injustice to have their common cause in hierarchical thinking. For, within the novels, there is more than one ideology, and thus more than one hierarchy at play.

Despite Corinne's and Amélie's fate being dictated by male figures (Oswald's father and Amélie's Grandfather respectively) and despite Malvina's loss of Fanny being the biological father's decision, in fact, the greatest domination over the heroines' lives come from older, socially superior *women*, agents of the patriarchy. For Corinne and Amélie, this happens after the death of the patriarchs; in Malvina's case, Mistress Birton bends Lord Sheridan's will to suit herself. As Staël and Cottin remind us, then, the patriarchy is run both by men *and* women, and is particularly upheld by elderly women who influence and implement men's decisions.

Lady Edgermond condemns Corinne's desire to pursue a career, stating that, for a woman, "la seule destinée convenable, c'est de se consacrer à son époux et de bien élever ses enfants" (C, pp.458-461). It is also Edgermond who forbids Corinne and Oswald from marrying, since she believes acting and writing render Corinne an unsuitable bride. Instead, she arranges for Oswald to wed her biological daughter Lucile, thus ensuring societal security and progression for the latter, and for herself. She is "une personne despotique au fond de l'âme" (Ibid., p.375), and her

demands become rules. In *Malvina*, the heroine's matriarchal 'benefactress', Mistress Birton, firstly condemns the heroine for associating with the woman writer Mistress Clare, considering it improper for a woman to enter the public sphere of writing (*M*, II:77). Indeed, Birton does not deem it necessary that women even learn how to read, as their lives are intended for the domestic sphere: "[M]on usage n'est pas de prêter mes livres aux femmes, qui ordinairement n'en ont aucun soin" (*Ibid.*, I:55). She enjoys the privileges of her place atop the social hierarchy (afforded to her by age, wealth and class) but believes that such privileges are not to be enjoyed by every woman. Secondly, Birton forbids Malvina's marriage to Edmond. Birton, like Lady Edgermond, has pre-arranged another engagement for the male protagonist, to ensure personal social progression. Lastly, Birton persuades Lord Sheridan that Malvina is an unfit mother and removes Malvina's adopted daughter. In *Amélie Mansfield*, the heroine's aunt is the dominating figure. She ensures Amélie's exclusion, and is responsible for denying Amélie and Ernest the chance for happiness when they later desire to marry.

Malvina, Amélie and Corinne are, therefore, as much victims of *class* as of *gender*. As such, they find themselves at the mercy of the aristocratic women whose complicity upheld the patriarchal structure. On Victorian Britain and its literature, Langland (1995, p.18) writes: "[f]requently interpreted only as victims of patriarchal oppression, bourgeois women were both oppressed as women and oppressors as middle-class managers". In Staël's and Cottin's novels the matriarchal figures in question are aristocratic, not middle-class; however, Langland's model still applies. The matriarchs continually oppress inferior (on account of their age and unmarried status) women in order to further their own social progression (or that of their close relatives); to ensure that women follow the marital destinies laid out for them; and to uphold the domestic ideal of the woman who leaves public occupations to men. Bourdieu (1991, p.164) discusses an "invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it". By refusing to recognise the rights and needs of their gender above those of their social position, matriarchs exert power over and victimise their own sex.

Langland's analysis is also pertinent because of the connection between these heroines and the natural world. In *Amélie Mansfield*, for example, life at Woldemar is subject to the same hierarchical order of class and power that we see in Langland's analysis of British novels. The same class hierarchy which causes Mme de Woldemar to manage the early years of Amélie's life, contrary to the latter's wishes, also occasions her to oppress nature. In later years, unable to punish Amélie herself physically, Woldemar uses her position of hierarchical dominance to command her servants to demolish Amélie's grove. However, whilst the female aristocrat orders

the destruction of nature, the male servant, Guillaume, ensures its survival at the first request to destroy it, and sacrifices his job when he refuses to execute orders the second time.

The attitudes of British matriarchs Mistress Birton and Lady Edgermond towards both domestic arrangement and the environment are better understood with the aid of Langland's analogy in her discussion of *David Copperfield*. Dickens' novel "reveals that household management depends less on the character of an English woman than it does on a precise set of organization skills that also would not be inappropriate in a factory" (Langland, 1995, p.82). Edgermond and Birton (fictional British women created at a time when Britain's order, industry and factories were revered (Hook, 2004, p.103)) approach the running of their own estates and social circles in an industrial and regulated manner, much like they would a factory. In Edgermond's household, women are denied variation in everyday life. Rather, they must perform the same tasks repeatedly, like a clockwork machine, being always "prêtes à recommencer le lendemain une vie qui ne différerait de celle de la veille que par la date de l'almanach. [...] Les femmes vieillissaient en faisant toujours la même chose, en restant toujours à la même place" (C, pp. 368-369). Indeed, the process is so automated, that Corinne declares: "une poupée légèrement perfectionnée par la mécanique [...] aurait très bien rempli mon emploi dans la société" (Ibid., p.369). Echoing the damage to the natural world caused by industrialisation, the way Edgermond and her equals force talented women to conform to the mechanics of the domestic household is compared to the stifling of nature:

Il y en avait quelques-unes qui, par la nature et la réflexion, avaient développé leur esprit, et j'avais découvert quelques accents, quelques regards, quelques mots dits à voix basse, qui sortaient de la ligne commune; mais la petite opinion du petit pays, toute-puissante dans son petit cercle, étouffait entièrement ces germes. (Ibid., p.370)

Furthermore, when Corinne is pushed to leave Britain by Edgermond's coldness, she finds herself in an Italian landscape abused by mankind for the purposes of industry. There is, therefore, no escape for Corinne from the effects of industrial domination on women and landscape.

Cottin directly informs us of Birton's lack of respect for the natural world. Birton refuses even to gaze through the window at the landscape, stating: "Croyez-moi, il vaut mieux regarder le beau ciel de France et d'Italie en peinture, que celui d'Ecosse en réalité" (M, I:27). Birton prefers to replace true nature with the works of mankind. Moreover, ownership of landscape paintings is a sign of class. Taking Langland's analogy to its extreme, Birton aligns herself with industry rather than nature to such an extent that, within the very walls of her castle, she runs not only a school but also a factory: "J'ai dans une aile de mon château, une école pour les enfants [...] et une forge où je distribue [...] du fer et des outils" (Ibid., I:39). Combining these

sites in one space highlights that her attitude towards her female inferiors is reflected in her attitude towards nature, for, given Birton's declarations elsewhere, we can reasonably assume that she has her school instruct its pupils (all girls) more in the way of household management than in that of academic pursuits. Her household therefore literally combines the charge of domestic affairs, the schooling of girls in the ways of domesticity, and factory management.

The arguments of radical ecofeminists stem from historical hierarchical interpretations of nature as a feminine entity subject to masculine whim. In antiquity and the Renaissance, there was "a masculine perception of nature as a mother and bride whose primary function was to comfort, nurture, and provide for the well-being of the male" (Merchant, 1990, p.9). Later, as the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century dawned,

[t]he new image of nature as a female to be controlled and dissected through experiment legitimated the exploitation of natural resources. Although the image of the nurturing earth popular in the Renaissance did not vanish, it was superseded by new controlling imagery. (Ibid, p.189)

However, in Cottin's and Staël's novels, it is older female and not male figures who devalue nature and view it as a commodity to be exploited for the purposes of industry. In aligning the domestic with the mechanical, Edgermond and Birton ensure that their fellow women are dominated by their orders just as nature is dominated by those engaged in the procedures and profits of the Industrial Revolution. They also devalue their own sex, seeing young, unmarried women as a commodity to be exploited for the purposes of the household, itself run like an industry. Thus, it is highly relevant that Devine (1992, p.51) writes:

Inherent in identifying the roots of victimization of both woman and nature is a danger of according identifications which would reinforce the duality of culture/man and nature/woman. It seems popular at present to cast the oppressor role as male and the victim role as female.

Both Cottin and Staël make clear how women and nature have been oppressed and/or devalued by a double-edged sword: by the demands of patriarchal figures, and also, indeed more so, by powerful women who ensure the application of those demands because social class requires it.

Souza's *Adèle de Sénange* makes even clearer the fact that we cannot rely solely on a model based on a 'male-oppressor/female-victim' dichotomy. Adèle is married in her teens to a man of approximately seventy. The marriage is arranged by a socially superior matriarch (Adèle's mother), whose original intention had been to confine Adèle to a convent. In persuading the mother to arrange the marriage, therefore, Sénange in fact saves Adèle (*Adèle de Sénange*, p.64). He knows his imminent death will leave his widow with social and economic freedom. Soon after the marriage, Adèle learns, from Sénange's friend Lord Sydenham, of the English style of landscaping gardens with rolling lawns and no geometrical patterns. She immediately wishes to

replace her husband's rigid French-style garden (an allegorical representation, in fact, of her thus-far restrictive life) with an English-style garden, a wish which mirrors her desire for personal liberty. Sénange, however, argues that, rather than tearing down his garden, she should have her own island on his estate, and the freedom and money to landscape there. He therefore saves his garden from destruction, as he saved Adèle from a life of imprisonment:

Ces arbres, plus vieux que moi encore, et qu'intérieurement je vous sacrifiais avec un peu de peine, l'été, me garantiront du soleil, l'hiver, me préserveront du froid [...]. Peut-être aussi la nature veut-elle que nos besoins et nos goûts nous rapprochent toujours des objets avec lesquels nous avons vieilli. Ces arbres, mes anciens amis, vous les couperiez! ils me sont nécessaires. (Ibid., pp.33-34)

Here we see an elderly, male character with a personal and emotional landscape connection, who would suffer in the event of ecological devastation. We also see this male, social and economic superior, wealthy landowner and patriarchal figure acknowledge that neither nature nor women must be rigidly controlled. He willingly grants his wife creative freedom, allowing his estate to showcase a garden which expresses liberty from constraint. He also knows that nature must be conserved. In refusing the destruction of pre-established natural features to make way for others, he teaches his wife the importance of respecting nature. Souza underlines that, "although alterations may be desirable, they need not be so drastic, nor be implemented so quickly" (Pacini, 2007, p.12).

Analysis of Staël's, Cottin's and Souza's novels allows for several revelations. They comment on humankind's exploitative treatment of the earth decades before the canonical environmental writing studied by modern ecocritical scholarship: half a century prior to Thoreau's *Walden*, and a century and a half prior to Carson's *Silent Spring*, for example. Ecofeminist arguments are also present in their novels long before such terminology existed. These novels show us that some women have a personal and emotional connection to nature and find themselves victimised along with it. However, the novels also show a development of thinking which prefigures that of twentieth- and twenty-first-century ecofeminism. They cause us to rethink several elements of cultural and radical ecofeminism, including the solutions they propose to the problem of the dual oppression.

Cultural ecofeminism is based on gender associations, and "assumes that women and men [...] have an essential human nature that transcends culture and socialization" (Prentice, 1988, pp.9-10). However, as a result, it reinforces gender labels and imposed restrictions, and "implies that what men do to the planet is bad; what women do is good" (Merchant, 2005, p.204). Staël, Cottin and Souza show that such beliefs are erroneous, and thus prefigure critics who now berate "cultural ecofeminism for being essentialist" (Nhanenge, 2011, p.153). Cultural ecofeminists contend that reversing the gender hierarchy, advocating "that women have a

superior relationship with nature” (Ibid., p.102), and reaffirming this superiority through “celebration of their common reproductive abilities” (Ibid., p.102) will solve the problem of the dual oppression of women and nature. However, Staël, Cottin and Souza had already shown that the solution could never be this simple. In *Corinne*, *Malvina* and *Amélie Mansfield*, as in the society under which they were penned, certain women already enjoyed a position atop the hierarchy, and used it to abuse rather than protect nature and women. Souza shows how a male figure with a connection to nature can protect and restore freedom to both landscape and women.

Radical ecofeminism, concerned with the patriarchal domination of women and nature, argues that “the earth is dominated by male-developed and male-controlled technology, science and industry” (Merchant, 2005, p.202). There is certainly some truth to this in *Corinne*, *Malvina* and *Amélie Mansfield*, as the heroines find themselves contending with the decisions of dominant, older, male figures, and as *Corinne* and *Malvina* reveal an inconsiderate male attitude towards landscape. However, as an application of Langland’s model reveals, firstly, the demands of the patriarchy are not exclusively executed by men, and, secondly, the metaphor of the destructive machine can also represent *matriarchal* oppression. Radical ecofeminists argue, following the suggestions of radical feminism, that we must eliminate the sex-hierarchy system altogether in order to liberate women and nature. However, this is not wholly feasible as a solution either, for it implies that there is only a gender hierarchy at play. In fact, as analysis of the above novels reveals, a social hierarchy is also involved, on account of which women themselves are complicit in the oppression. Ultimately, Staël, Cottin and Souza show that a combination of contemporary hierarchical ideologies cause the problems, and that this combination must be addressed in whole, not in part. Souza perhaps proves this best. After Sénange’s death, the now socially and economically liberated Adèle erects her husband’s tomb in her English-style garden. The addition of the old aristocrat’s tomb permits the fusion of male and female, old and young, rich and poor, conservation and creation in Adèle’s garden. Souza shows that the willful collaboration of all these are required if the problem of the dual oppression of women and nature is to be solved.

In fact, then, Staël, Cottin and Souza hint towards the position of social ecofeminists. Firstly, this is because, for the latter, “women do not have a closer relationship with nature than men have” (Nhanenge, 2011, p.104), and they “do not see men and women as biologically defined. Biology also does not determine their relationship to one another and to nature” (Ibid.). This suits Staël, Cottin and Souza well, for, to expose and criticize eighteenth- and nineteenth-century oppression of women, they would need to question contemporaries who expounded the belief in an essential woman-nature biological link. Essentialist thinking caused women in

eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France to be pigeonholed. In contesting the notion, Staël, Cottin and Souza take an initial step towards arguing that women have an existential being, not an essential one, and are entitled to equality of rights and involvement in the public sphere. Secondly, Staël, Cottin and Souza appear to prefigure social ecofeminists because the latter believe that “[e]xploitation of nature, domination according to class, race, and species, and gender supremacy, all have the same structure” (Ibid.). Staël and Cottin make clear that the oppression of women and nature stems from a social hierarchy as well as a gender hierarchy.

In conclusion, women writers’ sentimental novels, whilst engaging with common tropes, ultimately offer more than long-established early Romantic views of landscape, more than a simple Rousseauian return to nature, more than the experiencing of personal emotion amid nature. Rather, natural settings are used to expose and critique oppression. Indeed, whilst arguing that “the Romantic approach to nature was fundamentally ecological” (Worster, 1994 [1977], p.58), we can also argue that the early/pre-Romantic approach to nature in women’s sentimental novels is fundamentally ecofeminist. Similarly, whilst “we can trace the origins of our current ecological thinking to European Romanticism” (Harrison, 2006, n.p.), we can also confidently trace the origins and development of current ecofeminist thought to early/pre-Romantic women writers. Staël, Cottin and Souza establish and then build on arguments which would later be taken up by cultural and radical ecofeminists, extending towards a social ecofeminist understanding of the devaluation and oppression of women and nature. Analysis of their novels furthers our own understanding of the contemporary awareness of how women and nature can be dominated by not one, but a combination of hierarchical ideologies, and by the actions of both sexes. Their novels inform us that there is reciprocal obligation on the part of both genders and on the part of socially equal and unequal persons to uphold women’s rights and ecological rights.

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¹ Boudreau and Sullivan do not mention eighteenth-century literature. Finch-Race and Posthumus move directly from sixteenth- to nineteenth-century texts.

² This paper agrees with Noakes' delineation of the Romantic period: extending through the first half of the nineteenth century and having its roots in the pre-revolutionary period of Rousseau. Therefore the term 'early Romantic' is used to describe the novels analysed here.